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Iconicity in Saussure's Linguistic Work, and why it does not contradict the arbitrariness of the sign*

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1. *Introduction*

"The most celebrated opponent of the sound symbolic hypothesis", writes Magnus (2013: 201), "was, of course, Ferdinand de Saussure". Of course. One of Saussure's (1857–1913) key contributions to modern linguistics is the principle of the arbitrariness of the link between sound and meaning, or more precisely between signifier and signified within the linguistic sign, his most detailed discussion of which took place in his third course in general linguistics in 1910–1911. It was carried over into the posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* (Saussure 1916), where it has been the target of attacks and the occasion of apologies by linguists convinced of the explanatory power of sound symbolism, or iconicity.

If Magnus presents a particularly strong version of the view that arbitrariness rules out any possibility of iconicity in language, she is by no means alone in holding it. Ahlner & Zlatev (2010) and Wang (2010) are among recent publications that treat the two as being in direct opposition. Others, including Hutton (1989) and Chien (2011), have argued on the contrary that the existence of linguistic iconicity is implicit in Saussure's teaching, and Willems (2005) and

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De Cuypere (2008) believe that the published *Cours* underrepresents Saussure's interest in iconicity. Waugh (1994) finds some implicit recognition of iconicity in Saussure but nevertheless blames his doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign for excluding iconicity from modern linguistic research in terms only a little less trenchant than Magnus's.

None of these investigations has however taken into account the last paper Saussure published during his lifetime (Saussure 1912), in which he marshalled evidence for a very strong case of iconicity, where the shape of a sound is mimetic of the shape of the idea common to the words containing it (one of the rare later studies to discuss it is Gmür 1990: 47-49). To those who, like Magnus, understand iconicity to be the direct opposite of the arbitrariness that Saussure professed, it may look like a deathbed conversion, since he wrote this paper just after or even while giving the lectures on arbitrariness.¹ Yet if we go back 35 years to his second published paper (Saussure 1877), it too proposed a form-meaning link, more conventional but still of the sort that typically gets classified as iconic. In between, we have his testimony from 1892 concerning his own synaesthetic associations of vowels with colours, textures and smells (see §6 below).

This is starting to look like a very different man from the one of whose limited vision Magnus despairs. In this paper I shall offer evidence from these two papers of Saussure's in support of a view of arbitrariness as not incompatible with iconicity, and shall explain how I think iconicity can best be understood and approached within Saussure's theory of language.

2. “*Sur une classe de verbes latins en -eo*” (1877)

Saussure was 19 when his paper “On a class of Latin verbs in *-eo*” was read to the Société de Linguistique de Paris in 1877.² It concerns verbs of the fourth class in Sanskrit, which form their present ‘theme’ from the ‘characteristic’ ending *-ja*. One would expect their Latin congeners likewise to belong to a single verbal class, but in fact they are divided, some taking *-io* (*capio*, *cupio*), others *-eo* (*torqueo*, *sedeo*). Hermann Grassmann (1809–1877) had proposed that the choice depended on the length of the root syllable: if the root was short, the ending *-io* was taken, and if it was long, then *-eo* (Grassmann 1862:

¹ Since the volume was to be ready for presentation to Thomsen on his 70th birthday, 25 January 1912, chances are that Saussure was writing the paper no later than the semester in which the lectures on arbitrariness took place. For information concerning various details about Saussure's life referred to in this article see Joseph (2012).

² The paper was read to the Société on 24 March 1877, in Saussure's absence; so far as I can determine he had never yet been to Paris.

48-51). This worked in quite a number of cases, but Grassmann was forced to concede exceptions, including *sēdeo* “I sit” — rather too many exceptions for his proposal to be convincing.

Saussure approached the problem not just phonetically, as Grassmann had done, but via a combination of phonetics and semantics.

Voici l'hypothèse d'où il faudrait partir: les verbes de la classe en *-ja* dont le sens était neutre avaient primitivement l'accent sur la caractéristique. Les verbes à sens actif de la même classe accentuaient soit la racine, soit la caractéristique, sans règle fixe.

Par *verbes à sens neutre*, nous entendons non-seulement les verbes intransitifs, mais encore ceux des verbes transitifs qui renferment une idée de passivité ou qui indiquent un *état de l'âme*; p. ex. *patior*, *cupio*.³

This would result in two exceptionless rules:

- 1) all verbs of this class with a *neutral* meaning take the ending *-io*;
- 2) all verbs of this class that take the ending *-eo* have an *active* meaning.

These two rules do not cover all the cases, because neither rule holds in reverse. That is, verbs which take *-io* may still have an active meaning, and verbs with an active meaning can take either *-eo* or *-io*, unpredictably. Still, Saussure's solution appears on its face to be superior to Grassmann's by virtue of introducing a basic principle which Grassmann missed. And while Saussure does not claim to account for 100% of the cases, his solution holds in those cases to which it does apply. Admittedly, Grassmann's solution was simpler, as it depended on length alone. But in the economy of linguistic explanations, the elegance of a principle must be balanced against the residue of exceptions it leaves, and here Grassmann's solution did not measure up, to judge from the unwillingness of others to accept it.

Besides explanatory economy, however, another ideology was in play here: the Neogrammarian principle of exceptionless phonetic laws. By appealing solely to syllable length, an aspect of sound, Grassmann aligned his solution with the Leipzig ideal. Saussure's alternative implied that the *meaning* of a verb had a primary impact on its phonetic development. This looked from the Neogrammarian perspective like a retrograde step, since their whole defining project was to move away from the sort of explanation that operates on a word-

³ Saussure (1877: 280 [1922: 354]): “Here is the hypothesis from which one should begin: the verbs of the class in *-ja* whose meaning was neutral originally have the accent on the characteristic. The verbs of the same class with an active meaning accentuated either the root or the characteristic, without a fixed rule. / By *verbs of neutral meaning*, we mean not only intransitive verbs, but also those transitive verbs which contain an idea of passivity or which indicate a *state of mind*, e.g. *patior* ‘I suffer’, *cupio* ‘I desire’.” [My translation (JEJ), as are those that follow.]

by-word basis toward one in which sounds pursue a developmental path of their own, oblivious to the meanings and functions of the words in which they happen to occur. The data forced the Neogrammarians to admit exceptions, but they denied that these were ‘true’ exceptions and explained them by a psychological cause, analogy. Only as a last resort were *ad hoc* causes admitted.

What Saussure was proposing in this article both was *ad hoc* and directly invoked meaning. There is a grey area here. The classical languages had separate morphological paradigms for active and passive forms of a transitive verb, for instance *amat* “he loves”, *amatur* “he is loved”. In a sense, this involves meaning: more precisely, it implies that an aspect of meaning has been grammaticalized in the morphological system. One could say the same about tense and aspect: *amabat* “he was loving”, *amavit* “he has loved”. But grammarians have generally treated passivity, tense and aspect as morphological features, rather than semantic ones, especially in languages that have regular inflections for them — though also, by extension, in ones that do not. That requires a bit of tap dancing when it comes to certain intransitive verbs, called ‘deponent’, that always take the passive morphology, but do not have a meaning which can be easily interpreted as passive, such as *patior* “I suffer” or *loquor* “I speak”.

This dissatisfying taxonomy was not arrived at without explanatory efforts that proved even less satisfactory. An account of *patior* as inherently passive was plausible: the words *patior* and *passive* are etymologically related, after all, and suffering usually has some external cause. But try to extend such an explanation to *loquor*, and you end up asserting or at least implying some external cause for whatever a person says — that I am not the agent of my own speaking, but somehow its patient. Some have interpreted Saussure’s late formulation of *langue* in this way, generally in order to reject it; though I have met people who genuinely believe that everything we say and how we say it is predetermined, not even through social force but through some combination of genetics and external causation, so that there is ultimately no linguistic free will of the sort that Saussure located in *parole*. For such a person it would make perfect sense to say that *loquor* “I speak” is implicitly passive. But try this with the whole range of deponent verbs and your explanations will seem not just *ad hoc* but factitious, tautological, fantastic.

The young Saussure is not saying anything obviously factitious in his 1877 paper, but he is testing the limits. He proposes a group of verbs “indicating a state of mind” that includes *patior* and also *cupio* “I desire”, an active verb in Latin. Because this crosses the morphological boundary between active and passive/deponent, a linguist instinctively registers it as a semantic rather than a morphological category. But Saussure’s intention is to persuade us that, in the

deep history of Indo-European, it actually is a morphological, which is to say a grammatical, category. It is marked in Sanskrit by the characteristic *-ja*, giving it plausibility as a grammatical category. In Latin, on the other hand, it has ceased to be clearly such a category, but neither has it entirely disappeared. Its reflex is — known? felt? — by speakers through the *-io* ending. What is the precise level of awareness here? Semi-known? Semi-felt? Unknowingly marked, or left as a historical trace? But if the mark or trace is perceptible only to a linguist, and not felt at any level by speakers, then for Saussure it is an 'abstraction', an artefact of the linguist's analysis that corresponds to nothing real in the language. The closest term for the sort of category Saussure is suggesting may be *cryptotype*, Benjamin Lee Whorf's (1897–1941) neologism of six decades later (Whorf 1956 [1937]: 71; see further Lee 1996: 176).

For meaning to play a primary and regular role in the development of form challenges the Neogrammarian doctrine, and would seem to dilute the entire ancient heritage of teaching that the linguistic sign is arbitrary — that there is no direct linkage between sound and meaning in a word, other than the simple convention that binds them together as a sign.⁴ But at this point it behoves us to attend carefully to what Saussure said and did not say. Even in his third course in general linguistics, the source of most of the 20th-century doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, he devotes much attention to how arbitrariness is limited within a language by systematicity and association. The existence of regular active and passive paradigms in the Latin verb means that the relationship between *amat* and *amatur* is not arbitrary in the sense of being random. Besides their shared stem, the endings *-t* and *-tur* relate these words to an entire associative series and, for a Latin speaker, to the meanings 'active' and 'passive'. It is a strong association because of the large number of verbs that are part of the series, even though some of the most commonly used verbs, copulas and intransitives like *come* and *go*, do not take part in the series, nor do the deponents.

Saussure's posited cryptotypes aligning active and 'neutral' meaning with the endings *-eo* and *-io* suggest a weaker association, particularly because the cryptotypes apply in one direction only. He does not say that every Latin speaker had some awareness of the association. Indeed, the fact that no Latin grammarian ever thought to comment on it suggests in itself that, at most, it operated at a level which in his first course in general linguistics Saussure called 'a demi-unconsciousness' (see Joseph 2000b).

⁴ On the history of linguistic arbitrariness see Joseph (2000a); and on iconicity, Jakobson (1965), De Cuyper (2008), Magnus (2013).

3. “*Adjectifs indo-européens du type caecus ‘aveugle’*” (1912)

The 1877 paper concerns the diachronic development of the Indo-European languages, and does not directly address the question of speakers’ awareness. The same may be said of the paper from the other end of his career, “Indo-European adjectives of the type *caecus* ‘blind’”, written for the *Festschrift* for Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927) of 1912. It opens with Saussure speaking of how

Les diphtongues *ai* et *au* n’occupent qu’une place mal définie au sein de la morphologie ou du vocabulaire indo-européen. Entre autres faits qui contribuent à leur obscurité, elles ne figurent que dans une somme de mots extrêmement faible depuis l’origine [...]. Pris individuellement, ces mots à leur tour ont très souvent une position isolée dans la langue, ne se rattachant ni à un verbe fort ni à une famille étymologique quelconque. Il est clair que ce dernier trait, pour autant qu’il confèrerait à ces mots un certain caractère de régularité, ne le fait que d’une manière tout extérieure et négative. (Saussure 1912: 202 [1922: 595])⁵

Saussure’s contribution to this *Festschrift* was brief, roughly half the length of his articles honouring Jules Nicole (1842–1921) in 1905 and Louis Havet (1849–1925) in 1909. And it was daring, in that, for the first time since 1877, he was proposing that a particular set of sounds had a meaning or quasi-meaning in Indo-European. The ‘type’ in question is a group of adjectives linked phonetically by having a diphthong that starts with /a/, and semantically by referring to some infirmity or deviation from the ‘right’ or ‘straight’. The diphthong could be /ai/ (as in Latin *caecus* “blind”) or /au/, but also /ar/, /al/, /an/ or /am/, all of which are analysed by Saussure, starting in his *Mémoire* (1879), as /a/ + sonant, hence as diphthongs in the same way that /a/ + /i/, or /a/ + /u/, form diphthongs. Saussure does not mention here that few linguists had followed him in recognizing *ar*, *al*, *an* or *am* as diphthongs, though he knew it perfectly well and no longer taught his old doctrine to his students. Its appearance here has the effect of transporting author and honoree back to the spring-time of their careers.

The iconicity here is of two sorts. Besides the sound symbolism of how the ‘straight’ vowel /a/ ‘deviates’ off into the sonant, Saussure points out that

⁵ “The diphthongs *ai* and *au* occupy only an ill-defined place within Indo-European morphology or vocabulary. Among other facts which contribute to their obscurity, they have figured only in a group of words extremely weak since the origin [...]. Taken individually, these words in turn very often have an isolated position in the language, being attached neither to a strong verb nor to any etymological family whatever. It is clear that this latter feature, to the degree that it would confer upon these words a certain sort of regularity, does so only in a wholly exterior and negative way”.

words such as Latin *blaesus* “stammering”, *claudus* “limping”, *calvus* “bald”, *mancus* “maimed”, are very few in number and are isolated within the language, being attached neither to any strong verb or to an etymological family. Normally, this would be a reason for not studying them at all. But Saussure maintains that their isolation and the rarity of the /a/ diphthongs they contain give them “a certain kind of regularity, though it does so only in a completely exterior and negative way”. The semantic link, on the other hand, is a positive bond.

Coming so late in Saussure's career, subsequent to the full working out of his idea of the axis of association (now generally known as the paradigmatic axis, following Hjelmslev), it is strange to find him contemplating the possibility that a group of words have a kind of regularity that derives from their *lack* of regularity, their isolation, lack of attachment to a family. Negative value is perfectly Saussurean, yet the hint here that certain forms might be related associatively/paradigmatically, not by virtue of any link in sound or meaning but simply on account of being isolated within the system, is unique. It is this ‘negative iconicity’ of their isolation that gives the group of words their systematic dimension; the ‘positive iconicity’ of the deviation from the straight is more immediately striking, but is not described in terms of regularity.

It is tempting to wonder whether there is here a coded message to Thomsen, who along with Holger Pedersen (1867–1953) had sponsored Saussure's honorary membership in the Royal Danish Academy in 1910. Both Thomsen and Saussure had been isolated within Indo-European linguistics, not being attached to a family as the German Neogrammarians were, but on the edges, in Copenhagen and Geneva. Both had reason to feel hard done by at the hands of the Neogrammarians (see Konow 1927: 932). And when Saussure moves on to describe the infirmity, the deviation from straightness, of the diphthongs, one thinks of Francis De Crue's (1854–1928) comment about “son corps svelte, que sa dernière maladie finit par courber avant l'âge” (De Crue 1915 [1913]: 21).⁶ Indeed, one of Saussure's examples is Latin *pandus*, which he glosses as “courbé, voulté” (bent, stooping); and three of his Greek examples are ραιβός “courbe, cagneux” (bending, crooked), βλαισός “courbe, bancal” (bending, wobbly), γαμψός “courbe”.

I shall not go any further out on a biographical limb than “It is tempting to wonder”, because Saussure's ‘scientific’ publications all seem impersonal. Still, in his penultimate one, the 1909 contribution to Havet's *Festschrift*, can it be accidental that Saussure alludes to so many core ideas from his early *Mémoire* (Saussure 1879), reviewed so positively by Havet (1879) in the *Journal*

⁶ “[...] his svelte body, which his final illness left looking more hunched than his years”.

de Genève — including the theory of disyllabic roots, which Havet had been nearly alone in appreciating?

The *a* diphthongs would be marked (to use a later terminology) for rarity and isolation, and being so marked they would correlate with meanings that likewise involve marginality or abnormality. It is through the regularity of this correlation that these apparently marginal elements are incorporated into the system where everything connects. But how does this happen? Saussure's explanation relies on another aspect of his general linguistic system, the relationship of synchrony to diachrony. He imagines

le temps où il n'existait peut-être que quatre ou cinq adjectifs 'd'infirmité' avec le vocalisme *ai, au, an*, etc. Autour de ce noyau fourni par le hasard seront venues se fixer des formations toujours plus nombreuses, où une certaine communauté de l'idée mettait en faveur les diphtongues par *a*. Il s'agirait donc d'un fait d'analogie lexicologique [...]. (Saussure 1912: 206 [1922: 599])⁷

Note that he attributes the *origin* of this 'nucleus' not to iconicity, but to chance. Once the cryptotype was established, however, diphthongs with /a/ were 'favoured' for words sharing this general idea of infirmity. The favouring would presumably take place in the competition amongst innovative forms that occurs within *parole*. For Saussure, the key question in language change is not "Why are new forms introduced?". In *parole* speakers are constantly introducing new forms, only a tiny proportion of which will find the social sanction that will make them part of *langue* (in a new *état de langue*). Rather, the question is "Why are certain forms sanctioned and not others?" (see Saussure 1997 [1908]: 47; Joseph 2010a). This is where the sort of analogy-driven favouring he refers to could make a difference.

The associative relations that are central to Saussure's conception of *langue* make it plausible that the analogy he proposes was synchronically real for speakers — for *some* speakers, that is: enough of them for it to have left a recoverable diachronic trace, but perhaps not enough of them for the set of /a/ diphthongs to form a morpheme, a meaningful unit in the *langue* that all speakers share. Linguists would be less hesitant to recognize it as a morpheme if it was a derivational suffix, rather than the root vowel. Saussure admits that this sort of unit

⁷ "[...] a time when there existed perhaps only four or five adjectives of 'infirmity' with the diphthongs *ai, au, an*, etc. Around this nucleus furnished by chance, ever more numerous formations will have come to fix themselves, where a certain community of ideas favoured diphthongs with *a*. It would thus involve a fact of lexical analogy [...]"

est dans le cas ordinaire suffixal (syntagmatique); il ne l'est pas dans le cas **kaikos*, **laiwos* etc. Cela fait une différence, même sérieuse, mais qui n'est pas une différence radicale atteignant le principe lui-même. (Saussure 1912: 206 [1922: 599])⁸

And what is that principle? Most immediately, the 'meaning' of the Indo-European /a/ diphthongs, but more generally the principle that languages contain hidden form–meaning correlations that crystallize as speakers make analogical links in their minds. Saussure had taught his students that the work of the linguist consists almost entirely of limiting what is arbitrary in language (see §5 below). His last published work provided an example of how to do it, in a diachronic context.

4. *Arbitrariness and iconicity*

If it is the case that the /a/ diphthongs had enough iconic force to leave a recoverable trace diachronically, without however forming a proper morpheme within the *langue*, then it becomes evident why we are dealing with something that is both iconic and arbitrary, without there being any conflict between the two. Latin *caecus* had the same meaning, or signified, "blind", for those speakers to whom the iconicity was 'audible' as for those to whom it was not. Synchronically, whether or not a speaker is aware of these correlations, *the signifiers signify*. That is the point of arbitrariness. It does not negate the potential force of iconicity in diachrony or in *parole*. Iconicity might well be part of what it is that leads a speech community to accept particular innovations rather than others. And yet, the sign still functions perfectly well as part of the language for a speaker who does not interpret it iconically. Sound-meaning iconicity does not impact upon the fundamental arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

If this seems like an obvious point, it has not been treated as obvious. Discussions of iconicity have focussed on whether a word or form is iconic or not, an either/or choice.⁹ Rarely has the possibility been contemplated that it might

⁸ "[...] is in the ordinary case suffixal (syntagmatic); it is not so in the case of **kaikos*, **laiwos* etc. This makes a difference, even a serious one, but not a radical difference striking at the principle itself".

⁹ An exception is Willems (2005), which locates iconicity in the speaker's 'intention', following Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) view that semiosis is a necessarily intentional activity. This requires Willems to construct a two-tier intentionality, with a lower level at which basic semiosis takes place following the principle of arbitrariness, plus a second, 'higher-level' intention in which iconicity can occur. This has the virtue of moving iconicity out of the linguistic sign, though with complications unnecessary to an interpretation of Saussure's views, which I am trying to lay out in strictly Saussurean terms. Despite his relegating iconicity to a

be iconic for some speakers or hearers but not for others — that its iconicity, in other words, might be a matter of interpretation. The best known considerations of this matter are from Saussure's older contemporary Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), who tried to circumscribe interpretation within the sign itself. The 'interpretant' he postulated is what is in the sign that causes it to be interpreted in a certain way.¹⁰ Despite (or maybe on account of) his maintaining that "Of course, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (Peirce 1931–1958 II, p. 308), and that interpretation must be by somebody, he designates that somebody as a "quasi-interpreter" (ibid., IV, p. 551; see also Petrilli 2011: 79), in order to rescue signification from the threatening prospect that linguistic meaning might ultimately be indeterminate. Peirce is far from alone in suffering from what I have termed 'hermeneiaphobia', the fear of interpretation (Joseph 2010b), which is characteristic of linguistics broadly speaking.¹¹ Peirce wants the sign to be like God in William Cowper's hymn *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* (1774), who "is His own interpreter / and He will make it plain".

The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign as discussed by Saussure is not about iconicity. What is arbitrary in the linguistic sign as Saussure conceived it is very specific: the link between signifier and signified. Each is a mental pattern or trace. The signifier is a sound pattern, the signified a 'concept', specifically a concept inseparably bound to a particular sound pattern. The sum total of my signifieds does not equal my 'thought'. I am capable of thinking things for which my language does not have signifieds, and then having to push against its limits, as Saussure did when, in his lecture of 19 May 1911, he introduced the terms *signifiant* and *signifié*.

The term iconicity is again due to Peirce (by way of Morris 1946: 191–192), who divided signs into three types: icons, which signify what he called

secondary status, whereas I find no evidence of any such ordering in Saussure, Willems and I come ultimately to the same conclusion with regard to rejecting Magnus's depiction of Saussure as an "opponent of the sound symbolic hypothesis".

¹⁰ Peirce's fullest formulation is in a draft letter to Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912) dated 24–28 December 1908, first published in Peirce (1931–1958 VIII, 342–376). As with so many aspects of his thought this is one which he revisited periodically throughout his life, with the result that any succinct formulation of it will be open to contradiction.

¹¹ As exceptions I would count Antoine Culioli, and, weakly, Roy Harris (1931–2015), who preached a form of non-determinist communication that he failed to practise (see Joseph 2003); and beyond linguistics as usually defined, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), though not Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), who is often read (or criticized without being read) as denying the existence of any fixed meaning when, on the contrary, his work not only depends on it but is largely devoted to investigating the many paradoxes it entails.

their 'objects' through some sort of resemblance or imitation; symbols, which signify their objects through purely arbitrary and conventional means; and indices, which signify their objects through an actual, real connection between them. In each case the relationship is between the sign and an object-in-the-world, precisely what Saussure declined to comment on. As a linguist, he considered himself qualified to pronounce on *signs only*. Any connection between signifieds and things-in-the-world were not, in his view, the business of linguists, but of philosophers or psychologists. Peirce was a philosopher-psychologist, who took the relationship of signs to their objects as his key problem.

Had Saussure been aware of Peirce's views, he would no doubt have found them very interesting. But not within linguistics; rather, within the broader semiology that Saussure projected but never developed. He could not do that and still remain true to his scruple of staying within his specialized field.¹²

If we limit ourselves to the link between the mental pattern of a sound and the mental pattern of a concept, how could it be anything other than arbitrary? Concepts are not long or short, big or small. In the middle of the 19th century it was uncontroversial for John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) to assert that “all consciousness is of difference” Mill (1867 [1865]: 62).¹³ So the idea that either the signifier or the signified is a value derived purely from difference was not radical, but well established in British psychology and philosophy — which did not mean that linguists, especially in continental Europe, were still aware of it in the early 20th century.

Saussure made clear too that only the conjoined linguistic sign is real and concrete. The signifier or signified, on its own, is purely abstract. We can talk about them as we talk about the front or back of a sheet of paper, but we know that the only real, palpable thing is the whole sheet. Its 'front' and its 'back' are purely conceptual. Would it make sense to say that the front has an iconic or non-iconic relationship to the back? I do not think so. If you cut out a shape from the sheet, when you turn it round it will be the same if symmetrical, or the

¹² Linguistic signs as he conceives them fall within Peirce's category of 'symbols'. Over the last decade, 'indexicality', another term deriving from Peirce, has become a central concern in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (see Joseph 2013). Here what is indexed is not a word's meaning in the usual sense, but information about the speaker, based on which those listening to the speaker construct an identity for him or her. These indices are geographical, social, sexual, generational, professional — the list goes on.

¹³ The quote from Mill actually expresses Sir William Hamilton's (1766–1856) doctrine of the “relativity of human knowledge”, and although Mill is generally critical of Hamilton, he says that “With this doctrine I have no quarrel”. Joseph (forthcoming) traces this tradition of consciousness-through-difference back to the associationism of David Hartley (1705–1757).

mirror image if asymmetrical; either way the relationship is an indexical one in Peirce's terms. With the linguistic sign we do not even have the physical reality of a piece of paper, just two conjoined conceptual values-through-difference. To speak of an iconic relationship between them would be metaphorical at best.

When discussing arbitrariness, Saussure brings up the usual objection to it — cases of onomatopoeia — in order to show that they do not in fact bear on the question. An onomatopoeia is a perceived relationship between the sonic realization of a signifier and some other sound, for example a sound made by the animals whose category is, in effect, the signified. So Chinese 喵 *miao* “meow” and even 猫 *mao* “cat” are onomatopoeic if one interprets them as iconic or, more accurately, indexical of the noise cats make (so too for English *meow*). Now, is that noise an inherent property of the signifieds *cat* and *meow*? Let's say it is; it needs to be for onomatopoeia. But that concerns the relationship between signifieds and things in the world, which Saussure made clear that he was not qualified to pronounce on, and is not what the arbitrariness of the sign is about. Onomatopoeia involves a link between, on the one hand, the sonic realization of a signifier and a sound-in-the-world, and on the other, a signified and that sound-in-the-world or the sound made by some thing-in-the-world. In both cases, it means looking outward from the sign to the world.

sounds-in-the-world ← signifier — signified → things-in-the-world

But within the sign, the link between signifier and signified operates identically regardless of what outward links may or may not exist. Such outward links are in any case a matter of interpretation, of opinion; and as Saussure pointed out, they are always mitigated by conventionality. Iconicity is in the eye or ear of the beholder; but what distinguishes a linguist from a semiotician is precisely that the linguist focuses on the centre of the linguistic sign, where the bond between signifier and signified is what Peirce called ‘symbolic’.

The key, for Saussure, is that even with words like ‘meow’ where an iconic element seems evident, if cats were bred so as to make a different sound, *the words* meow, miao *and* mao *would not cease to signify*. They would still mean what they mean now, just because the link of signifier and signified is arbitrary. Even if some of us made up a new word for the sound made by this new breed of cat, and began introducing it into our speech, that would not change the language, unless and until the entire community of language users accepted it — at which point we would have a new language, in Saussure's view. Even then we still could not be sure whether someone uttering the word, or hearing and understanding it, was experiencing it iconically or just conventionally.

To take one of Saussure's own examples, there exist apparently mimetic signs, such as Latin *pluit* "it is raining", in which it is claimed that the sound of a raindrop can be heard. This is a matter of interpretation. For someone who hears the raindrop in *pluit*, the mimetic link is real, despite the word's going back to an earlier *plovit*, where onomatopoeia seems less plausible (Saussure and Constantin 2005 [1911]: 77).¹⁴ The Saussurean principle of arbitrariness holds that the linguistic sign operates in the same way whether there is such a link or not: the word *pluit* is no 'truer' for someone who hears the rain dropping in it than it is for those like me who do not hear it; nor is it truer than a word such as *rain* in which any notion of a link between sound and idea seems far-fetched. It may well be that someone who hears the raindrop in *pluit* experiences this word more intensely, more vividly (see Joseph forthcoming), but that is on the individual level of *parole*.

5. *Relative arbitrariness*

Nor does the link between signifier and signified figure centrally in what, in his lecture of 9 May 1911, Saussure referred to as 'relative arbitrariness'. He began by saying that "Nous avons posé comme étant une vérité évidente que le lien du signe par rapport à l'idée représentée est radicalement arbitraire" (Saussure and Constantin 2005 [1911]: 230).¹⁵ Of course, it was not 'evident' to his students, nor to others who had not shared his boyhood education by old Genevese men who were still teaching the *grammaire générale* tradition. But it is not as though Saussure had never thought his way through that tradition and beyond. Much of the rest of the course explores how "Une partie seulement des signes dans toute langue seront radicalement arbitraires. Chez d'autres <signes> intervient un phénomène au nom duquel on peut distinguer un degré. [...] Il arrive que le lien entre le signe et la sonorité est relativement motivé" (ibid.).¹⁶

His first example of a motivated sign is French *dix-neuf* "19", versus *vingt* "20". *Vingt* is perfectly unmotivated — nothing in the acoustic image connects

¹⁴ The editors of the posthumous Saussure (1916) replaced this with the French examples *glas* "knell" and *fouet* "whip" (Saussure 1922 [1916]: 102). The case of *fouet* had been discussed in Egger (1881: 248), a book Saussure is known to have studied (Joseph 2012: 288-291). On Derrida's (1974: 106 b i) treatment of the *glas* and *fouet* examples see Joseph, Love & Taylor (2001: 198); Culler (2003).

¹⁵ "We have posited as a self-evident truth that the link of the sign in relation to the idea represented is radically arbitrary".

¹⁶ "Only a part of the signs in every language will be radically arbitrary. In the case of other <signs>, we encounter a phenomenon which makes it possible to distinguish degrees. [...] It can happen that the <link between the> sign and the sonority is relatively motivated".

in any way with the concept. But this is less true of *dix-neuf*, since it evokes the terms which compose it: *dix* “10” and *neuf* “9”. Similarly, *poirier* “pear tree” recalls the simple word *poire* “pear”, while its suffix *-ier* brings to mind *cerisier* “cherry tree”, *pommier* “apple tree”, and so on.

Saussure contrasts pairs of words in which one is arbitrary, the other relatively motivated: whereas *berger* “shepherd” is unmotivated, *vacher* “cow-herd” contains *vache* “cow”.¹⁷ The English plural *ships* recalls through its formation the whole series *flags*, *birds*, *books* etc., whereas *men*, *sheep* recall nothing. The lecture concludes with a statement that seems paradoxical coming from the man who established arbitrariness as a principle of modern linguistics:

Tout ce qui fait d’une langue un système <ou un organisme> demande d’être abordé sous ce point de vue, où on ne l’aborde guère en général: <comme> une limitation de l’arbitraire par rapport à l’idée. Implicitement on s’appuiera ainsi sur la meilleure base possible, puisque la donnée fondamentale du signe linguistique, c’est l’arbitraire. (Saussure and Constantin 2005 [1911]: 232)¹⁸

In the lecture of 12 May he says that “Toute langue contient parallèlement mêlés en proportions diverses les deux éléments: le parfaitement immotivé et le relativement motivé” (ibid.),¹⁹ adding that (p. 234):

En effet, on peut distinguer comme deux pôles contraires, comme deux courants antinomiques entre eux régnant en toutes langues, la tendance à employer l’instrument lexicologique ou la tendance à employer l’instrument grammatical. [...] Le type de l’ultralexicologique est par exemple dans le chinois, le type de l’ultragrammatical: indo-européen primitif, sanscrit, grec.²⁰

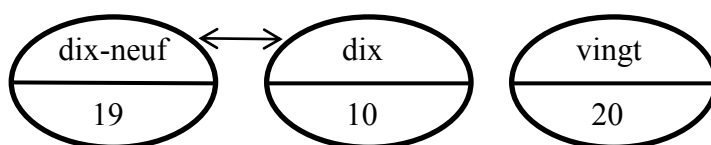
¹⁷ Although unrelated to *mouton* “sheep”, *berger* is related historically to *brebis* “ewe” — but few French speakers are aware of this.

¹⁸ “Everything that makes a system <or an organism> of a language demands to be addressed under this viewpoint, from which it is in general hardly ever addressed: <as a> limitation of arbitrariness in relation to the idea. Implicitly then the best possible basis will be relied on, since the fundamental given for the linguistic sign is its arbitrariness.”

¹⁹ “Every language contains, mixed in parallel in diverse proportions, the two elements: the perfectly unmotivated and the relatively motivated”.

²⁰ “In effect, one can distinguish as two opposite poles, as two antinomically opposed currents reigning in all languages, the tendency to employ the lexicological instrument and the tendency to employ the grammatical instrument. [...] The stereotype of the ultra-lexicological is for example in Chinese, the ultra-grammatical stereotype: primitive Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek”.

Saussure now brings up the point that what he is calling relative arbitrariness has to do with the relation *between signs*. It does not affect the radical arbitrariness *within the sign*, between an acoustic image and its associated concept.



And yet, everything comes down to the relation within the sign: “C’est la seule qui soit à considérer” (p. 235).²¹ He acknowledges that “Cela ne frappe pas du tout au premier moment”, but insists that “Nous <ne> pourrions <jamais> concevoir la relation d’un mot à l’autre sans concevoir la relation <intérieure> pour chaque mot entre le concept et l’image acoustique” (p. 236).²²

6. *Saussure’s synaesthesia*

Finally, as I mentioned at the outset, Saussure’s denial of iconicity is further thrown into question by his responses in May 1892 to Théodore Flournoy’s (1854–1920) questionnaire about ‘photism’ or ‘coloured hearing’, associations between sounds and colours. I shall cite the first two paragraphs of what Saussure wrote:

Nous écrivons en français la même voyelle de quatre manières différentes dans *terrain*, *plein*, *matin*, *chien*. Or quand cette voyelle est écrite *ain*, je la vois jaune pâle comme une brique mal cuite au four; quand elle est écrite *ein*, elle me fait l’effet d’un réseau de veines violacées; quand elle est écrite *in*, je ne sais plus du tout quelle sensation de couleur elle évoque dans mon esprit, et suis disposé à croire qu’elle n’en évoque aucune; enfin si elle s’écrit *en* (ce qui n’arrive qu’après un *i* précédent), l’ensemble du groupe *ien* me rappelle assez un enchevêtrement de cordes de chanvre encore fraîches, n’ayant pas encore pris la teinte blanchâtre de la corde usée.

Ce n’est donc pas, semble-t-il, la voyelle comme telle, c’est-à-dire telle qu’elle existe pour l’oreille, qui appelle une certaine sensation visuelle correspondante. D’un autre côté, ce n’est pas non plus la vue d’une certaine lettre ou d’un certain groupe de lettres qui appelle cette sensation. Mais c’est la voyelle en tant que contenue dans cette expression graphique, c’est l’être imaginaire que forme cette première association d’idées, qui, par une autre association, m’apparaît comme doué d’une cer-

²¹ “This is the only one to consider”.

²² “This does not strike one at all at first glance [...] We could <never> conceive the relationship of one word to the other without conceiving the <inner> relationship for each word between the concept and the +acoustic image”.

taine *consistance* et d'une certaine *couleur*, quelquefois aussi d'une certaine *forme* et d'une certaine *odeur*.²³

He goes on to give still further detail, pointing out that his associations are less strong with regard to languages other than French. It is surprising that it is with sound-letter combinations that he has associations, given his strongly worded views in the first course on general linguistics about the illusions to which writing gives rise. But he leaves no room for doubt about the reality and the regularity of these associations — *for him*. He is under no illusion that his associations are shared by others. The associationism that was dominant in French-language psychology at the time was based on how an individual's first experiences of some sensory perception was linked to the surrounding context in which it took place.²⁴ Associations such as Saussure's differed in kind from the conjunctions of signifier and signified that constitute a language, because a language is, as Saussure repeatedly stated, a 'social fact'. A language has an 'axis of association', but it has been conventionalized and socially shared. Synaesthetic associations have not been conventionalized or socially shared, and that includes iconic relationships such as the one Saussure posited for the Indo-European /a/ diphthongs in his 1912 article.

So he experienced *ain* as pale yellow; someone else might experience it in the same way, but most people do not, as Flournoy's results showed, in case there was any doubt. And yet, all these French speakers were perfectly capable of understanding *pain* or *main*. Saussure himself did not understand *pain* better than *main* on account of the signified of *pain* corresponding iconically to the

²³ Response to Flournoy's questionnaire by 'an eminent linguist **Mr X**' (identified as Saussure by Cifali 1983 from the original notes of Flournoy's research assistant Édouard Claparède [1873–1940]), quoted in Flournoy (1893: 50–52): "In French we write the same vowel four different ways in *terrain*, *plein*, *matin*, *chien*. Now when this vowel is written *ain*, I see it in pale yellow like an incompletely baked brick; when it is written *ein*, it strikes me as a network of purplish veins; when it is written *in*, I no longer know at all what colour sensation it evokes in my mind, and am disposed to believe that it doesn't evoke any; finally if it is written *en* (which only happens after a preceding *i*), the whole of the group *ien* recalls for me a tangle of hemp ropes that are still fresh, not having yet taken on the off-white tint of used rope. So it doesn't seem to be the vowel as such — as it exists for the ear, that is — that calls forth a certain corresponding visual sensation. On the other hand, neither is it seeing a certain letter or group of letters that calls forth this sensation. Rather it is the vowel as it is contained in this written expression, it is the imaginary being formed by this first association of ideas which, through another association, appears to me as endowed with a certain *consistency* and a certain *colour*, sometimes also a certain *shape* and a certain *smell*."

²⁴ This again harks back to the associationism of Hartley (1747, Sec. 2, §18; see Joseph forthcoming), transmitted principally via the works of Alexander Bain (1818–1903) to become an important principle of French-language psychology in the last third of the 19th century.

colour he associated with *ain*, whereas the signified of *main* does not. There is mimesis and iconicity *for him* — not for the sign. *Qua* sign, *pain*, like every linguistic sign, signifies through the arbitrary bond between signifier and signified, regardless of what iconicity may overlay it for one, or some, or many speakers. Or indeed for all of them, since tomorrow some child may learn the sign without the iconicity, and who will know that this is the case, so long as the child uses the sign appropriately?

There is no contradiction. Iconic associations are of much interest to psychologists and semioticians, as well as to poets and readers of poetry. But Saussure considered himself a linguist or 'grammarian', and the grammarian's domain is the linguistic sign. Linguistic signs function regardless of iconic associations — which, however, may be useful in answering the cardinal question of diachronic linguistics: Why, amongst all the innovative forms introduced by speakers into *parole*, are certain ones and not others socially sanctioned so as to become part of the next *état de langue*?

7. *Conclusion*

My campaign against hermeneiophobia is not waged in aid of free interpretation of texts. There are richer and poorer, more and less coherent interpretations, ones that square better and worse with the documentary record, which makes for complex work by readers who are quite the opposite of Peirce's 'quasi-interpreters'. Saussure has been interpreted as leading the struggle to do away with diachronic linguistics, as working to undermine his model of the linguistic sign with his research into anagrams, and as having devised a theory of communication. Recently I read that he "presupposes that word meaning is a single monolithic thing — the word's referent" (Magnus 2013: 202), and that "Saussure (1916: 115-116) regarded linguistic change as affecting single units only, which means that diachronic linguistics, unlike synchronic linguistics, cannot be a systematic or structure-based discipline" (Itkonen 2013: 763). And I have heard a senior sociolinguist matter-of-factly oppose the arbitrariness of linguistic signs to the existence of language universals.²⁵ Far from being opposed to universals, it actually *is* one, as Saussure formulated it. It would be a forlorn hope to imagine ever doing away with weak interpretations of Saussure

²⁵ John R. Rickford, paper to the Edinburgh Linguistic Circle, 12 Sep. 2013, where Rickford reported this point as arising in the course of email discussion between himself and William Labov concerning Labov's controversial (to sociolinguists) belief in the separability of linguistic and sociolinguistic factors. As I pointed out in the discussion after the paper, this separability, as Labov and Rickford treat it, is a reaffirmation of the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*.

or attribution to him of ideas contrary to what he said and wrote. Those who take Saussure to deny the possibility of iconicity are labouring under a comparable misinterpretation.

Saussure taught that one of the first distinctions to be made is between what a language is and how it is used, and that this distinction rests on the difference between what is a socially shared system of pure values on the one hand, and what an individual does with the system on the other. His interests in poetry, anagrams, legends, symbolism and his own synaesthesia were all about the latter — all, in other words, located within *parole*. Such effects as any of them might have on *langue* would be indirect, shaping a future *état de langue* just as other aspects of *parole* may do.

Where iconicity was concerned, he was similarly interested — not a denier. As a matter of individual rather than social interpretation and use, iconicity potentially affects a future *état de langue*, without attenuating the arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified that he identified as the first principle of the linguistic sign.

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SUMMARY

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is routinely criticized for denying the possibility of iconicity in language through his principle of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. Yet two of his articles, one from the beginning (1877) and the other from the end (1912) of his career, propose analyses of the development of certain Latin verbs and adjectives in which iconicity plays a key role. Saussure did not dismiss iconicity, but limited its sphere of application to the relationship between signs and their referents, which falls outside linguistics as he defined it. Hence iconicity does not contradict arbitrariness, which applies to the relationship between signifier and signified within the linguistic sign.

RÉSUMÉ

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) est fréquemment la cible de critiques selon lesquelles son principe de l'arbitraire du signe aurait nié la possibilité de l'iconicité dans le langage. Toutefois, deux de ses articles, l'un du début (1877), l'autre de la fin (1912) de sa carrière, proposent des analyses du développement de certains verbes et adjectifs latins où l'iconicité aurait joué un rôle important. Saussure ne rejeta pas l'iconicité, mais limita son champ d'application au lien entre les signes et leurs référents, un lien qui se situe en dehors de la linguistique telle qu'il la définit. Donc l'iconicité ne contredit pas l'arbitraire, qui s'applique spécifiquement au lien entre le signifiant et le signifié à l'intérieur du signe linguistique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) wird oftmals kritisiert, weil er die Möglichkeit der Ikonizität der Sprache in Abrede stelle dadurch, dass er auf dem Prinzip der Arbitrarität des sprachlichen Zeichens beharre. Jedoch in zwei Aufsätzen, einem vom Beginn (1877) und einem am Ende seiner Laufbahn (1912), schlägt er Analysen in der Entwicklung gewisser lateinischer Verben und Adjektive vor, in denen die Ikonizität eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Saussure verneinte die Ikonizität der Sprache nicht grundsätzlich, begrenzte jedoch deren Gebrauch zum Verhältnis zwischen Zeichen und deren Referenten, das er jedoch als außerhalb der Sprachwissenschaft wie er sie definierte,

betrachtete. Daher widersprach die Ikonizität nicht der Arbitrarität des sprachlichen Zeichens, die sich auf das Verhältnis zwischen *signifiant* und *signifié* innerhalb des sprachlichen Zeichens bezieht.

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